

Martin Luther's School of the Cross

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What was Martin Luther's theology of sanctification, his view of holy living and dying, of growing in faith and discipleship on this side of heaven? Building upon sources in Luther's works, this paper proposes that the concept of a "school of the cross" (*scola crucis* in Latin) can provide a rich textual and contextual framework for understanding the reformer's vision of Christian growth as a disciple.

This *scola crucis* is a textual framework, because it comes directly from Luther's personal history and writings; it is contextual because it brings together many frequently hard-to-connect pieces of Luther's theology, including his views of discipleship, sanctification, baptism, and the *ars moriendi* (the art of dying). Further, as part of an educational and experiential journey, Luther's school of the cross engages personal, communal, and dynamic aspects of life together. As will be shown below, this *scola crucis* fosters a theology of experience that has room for suffering, wonder, and joy, as it invites lifelong growth in empathy, hope, and courage.

1. The "School of the Cross" in Luther's Lectures on Isaiah (1527)

The exact phrase *scola crucis* appears exactly once in Luther's collected works, specifically in his published lectures on Isaiah. Luther delivered these lectures in the months and years following a near-fatal illness and an outbreak of the plague in Wittenberg in 1527. He called this his experience of the "school of the cross" in comments on Isaiah 60:19, a verse which reads, "The sun shall no longer be your light by day, nor for brightness shall the moon give light to you by night; but the Lord will be your everlasting light, and your God will be your glory." Reflecting on this passage, Luther said,

This is repetition and exclamation, that is [says Isaiah], “I am speaking of a spiritual kingdom and an invisible light, because all this glory does not appear. Your glory will be hidden and subject to disgrace, and your glorification will remain concealed.” ...This is repetition of the chapter from the beginning, for it speaks of the invisible light by which all are enlightened in such a way that they are persuaded to believe what they do not see and turn their eyes away from things that we see. Tribulation and affliction remove all things visible from us. Therefore we must believe in the new light and cling to it. These are articles of faith which are spoken in the school of the cross [*scola crucis*].¹⁾

In Luther’s school of the cross, people learn to see God’s glory hidden under disgrace, tribulation, and affliction. Education in this school acquaints one with a light that cannot be seen apart from faith and the work of God.

Even so, this hidden glory does not simply tell a Cinderella story, in which goodness is vindicated after a time of unjust suffering; rather the nature of God’s goodness itself is revealed to be different than expected. This “new light” and “invisible light” is the power of a divinely vulnerable and longsuffering love, heard in the promises given by the prophet Isaiah to a defeated people and seen in the wounds of Jesus’ risen hands and side (John 20:27). It is a relational love “made perfect in weakness” (2 Corinthians 12:9) rather than an idealized love that could somehow remain untouched or unmoved by pain, loss, grief, and death. The school of the cross redefines both God and love through the experience of a Risen Lord whose resurrected body still shows its wounds.

2. *Luther as a Theologian of Experience*

Luther explained his focus on Christ’s cross most fully in the *Heidelberg Disputation* and the *Explanations of the 95 Theses*, which were each composed

1) Martin Luther, *Luther’s Works*, American Edition, 55 volumes (Philadelphia and St. Louis: Fortress and Concordia, 1955-1986 [Hereafter LW]), 17:325; Martin Luther, *Luthers Werke: Kritische Gesamtausgabe, Schriften*, (Weimar: Böhlau, 1930-1985 [Hereafter WA]), 31 I:512.

in the spring of 1518. These works describe theologians of the cross as those who speak of the crucified and hidden God, of God at work in the least likely people, places and ways.²⁾ In his lectures on Isaiah, however, Luther described not a theological concept or well-trained theologian but rather a community of people who live, learn and experience this reality as lifelong education in the power and light of the cross.

Such personal expressions of life with Christ were not abstract to Luther, who was himself intimately familiar with suffering, struggle, and loss. For instance, amid the near-fatal sickness that he endured in 1527—an illness characterized by debilitating fevers, headaches, and vertigo—Luther's colleagues Justus Jonas and Johannes Bugenhagen wrote private accounts of their time at his sickbed in case these might be the reformer's last moments. As Luther began to recover from a harrowing night, he told Jonas, "Doctor, I must note the day. Yesterday I went to school."³⁾ Which school had Doctor Luther attended? In his near-fatal illness, Luther had attended the school of the cross, aware of both his mortality and God's promises of grace.

Indeed, the Isaiah lectures from that period show much consideration of this theme, as the reformer brought personal and pastoral insights from God's word into the classroom. When introducing Second Isaiah's opening words "Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God" (40:1) and the opening words of chapter 60 itself—"Arise, shine; for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you" (60:1)—Luther emphasized that the glory of the Lord comes to those who have been brought low. Connecting this hidden glory of God to a school, Luther commented on a passage in Isaiah 41 that begins "When the poor and needy seek water, and there is none, and their tongue is parched with thirst, I the Lord will

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- 2) LW 31:225; also, 31:40-41 and 31:227. See also, Mark Mattes, "Theology of the Cross" in *Dictionary of Luther and the Lutheran Traditions*, Timothy Wengert, general editor (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2017), 734-737.
- 3) Martin Luther, *Luthers Werke: Kritische Gesamtausgabe, Tischreden*, (Weimar: Böhlau, 1930-1985 [Hereafter WA TR]), 3:90.22-23. See also, Martin Lohrmann, "Bugenhagen's Pastoral Care of Martin Luther," *Lutheran Quarterly* 19 (2010), 130 and footnote 27. The German text reads, "Doctor: Ich mus den tag merken. Ich bin gestern tzu Schule gewesen."

answer them, I the God of Israel will not forsake them" (41:19). Calling the endurance of such trials a "school of afflictions," he wrote,

The Holy One of Israel does these things in order that His saints may see and know and consider. God does this in order to recall us from ourselves back to the Lord. For that reason God sends a variety of trials, heresies, and the cross in order to train God's people and mortify them in their own righteousness and presumption... That is a real school of afflictions and continuing conflicts... We are justified through faith in Jesus Christ, because the Lord mortifies us in various ways to the point of despair, and then lifts us up again, so that by experience we are compelled to say, "I did not do this, though I expended all my strength, but the hand of the Lord did it."⁴⁾

In this school of afflictions, the Lord might sometimes use negative means—God's alien work, as Isaiah 28:21 puts it—to drive people to God's mercy.

Far from blaming victims or requiring suffering as part of salvation, Luther's theology of the cross cannot and should not be used to justify twisted forms of redemptive suffering. As Luther asserted in the *Heidelberg Disputation*, "A theology of glory calls evil good and good evil. A theology of the cross calls the thing what it actually is."⁵⁾ For Luther, a theology that blames victims or clothes oppression in pious garb is false theology. A godly school of afflictions or school of the cross does not call good what is evil, neither does it somehow turn sin, abuse, and injustice into virtues. Rather, the school of the cross provides instruction in the lifelong journey of learning to see and name the truth about sin and human need, and of learning to see and name God's power to work for life amid such broken realities. That is, the school of the cross provides the daily setting for the Lutheran exercise of applying law and gospel to individual lives and the wider community for the sake of health and freedom.

4) LW 17:49-50, amended for gender inclusive language.

5) LW 31:40.

3. *Lutheran Approaches to Suffering and Experience*

Although this paper does not seek to engage in theodicy (theological reflection on suffering and evil), it is worth noting that the Lutheran reformers acknowledged many diverse causes of suffering. A later edition of Philip Melanchthon's *Loci Communes*, for instance, lists ten reasons why people of faith suffer, including participation in the general human condition, the frequent ungodliness and injustice of earthly powers, and the opportunity to testify to the gospel. In Melanchthon's work, God is presented as clearly knowing that not all suffering is the same, therefore requiring different divine responses. In language similar to Luther's "school of the cross," Melanchthon described his list, saying, "the church is subject to the cross, and it is worthwhile to think about [those reasons]."⁶ Although not directly fitting the theme of this paper, the concept of an "ecclesiology of the cross" adds an important communal dimension to Christ's call to pick up the cross and follow him.

Other significant descriptions of life as a school of learning to know the power and truth of the cross can be found throughout Luther's career. Written around 1518/19, Luther's second set of lectures on Psalm 5 includes the words, "the cross alone is our theology" [*CRUX sola est nostra theologia*] and "the cross tests everything" [*Crux probat omnia*].⁷ Preaching on John 8—"the truth will make you free"—in the early 1530s, Luther paraphrased the text, speaking in the first person voice of Jesus: "There are few who remain true to the Gospel in the face of cross and persecution. Where can one find those who are constant? Therefore I say that if you continue in My Word, you are truly My disciples. If My doctrine pleases you, you are well schooled and know everything. And if you persevere in the doctrine through cross and suffering, then you are My disciples."⁸ In this passage,

6) Philip Melanchthon, *Loci praecipui theologici* 1559, in *Melanchthon's Werke in Auswahl* [Studienausgabe], volume 2, 2, edited by Hans Engelland (Gütersloh: Bertelsmann, 1953), 582-583; see also, Philip Melanchthon, *Loci Communes* 1543 [sic], translated by J. A. O. Preus (St. Louis: Concordia, 1992), 168.

7) WA 5:176.32-33 and 179.31, respectively.

8) LW 23:392-393.

being “well-schooled” in the gospel means remaining with Christ through crosses, sufferings, and—in the case of the disciples after Jesus’ arrest—their own betrayals and failures.

Adding another personal dimension to this topic, Roland Bainton’s classic biography, *Here I Stand* has a chapter in which Luther’s view of the joys and challenges of marriage and family life are described as a “school for character.”⁹⁾ Luther himself, in a 1531 sermon on Hebrews 13:4, preached, “whoever enters into marriage, enters into a real monastery full of temptation [*Anfechtung*].”¹⁰⁾ Having wrestled with sin and temptation in his earlier monastic life, Luther still encountered plenty of struggles as a husband and father. These hardships did not have their origin in gender differences or the estate of marriage but in the devil’s hard work to damage and destroy good homes and healthy relationships.¹¹⁾ In this light, Luther interpreted marriage as a central human relationship that exists under the cross, encounters real-life challenges, and leans upon God’s gracious guidance and preserving.¹²⁾

Present in works spanning Luther’s early and mid career, the school of the cross also appears in the Genesis lectures that Luther delivered in the last decade of his life. For instance, the reformer named the matriarch Hagar as a teacher in “the Lord’s school.” Describing Hagar’s second experience of deliverance from exile, Luther said,

because the Word of God is never proclaimed in vain, Hagar, too, is first awakened from death, as it were, by the angel’s voice. Then she is enlightened with a new light of the Holy Spirit, and from a

9) Roland Bainton, *Here I Stand: A Life of Martin Luther* (New York: Penguin, 1950 [1995]), 234.

10) WA 34 I:63.29-30: “wer jnn den ehestand tritt, der gehet jnn ein recht Kloster, das voller anfechtung ist.”

11) WA 34 I:63.24-39. See also, Luther’s Marriage Booklet, in *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, edited by Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000 [Hereafter BC]), 369.5.

12) BC 369.5, 370.14, and 371.16.

slave woman she also becomes a mother of the church, who later on instructed her descendants and warned them by her own example not to act proudly; for, as she said, she had been a lawful wife of Abraham, the very saintly patriarch, and had borne him his first-born son....

After Hagar had been instructed in the Lord's school in this manner, she gave excellent instruction to many pupils concerning the foremost doctrine taught in the church of God, namely, that no glorying according to the flesh is of any avail. She said that she had been in the same bed with Abraham and yet had been cast out of his house. Therefore let the ones who boast, boast in the Lord (cf. 1 Cor. 1:31), that is, that they have the promise and believe it, and that without this faith everything else is useless.¹³⁾

Amid this praise of Hagar, Luther invoked a line from Genesis 16:4, which says that Hagar looked with contempt on Sarai after she conceived Ishmael. This perceived contempt led to Hagar's first banishment from the household. But after this, Hagar was cast away a second time (Genesis 21). This time there is no indication that either she or Ishmael had acted with contempt or pride. Here Luther read something into the text that is not there. Despite his own projections about Hagar, however, he called her a "mother of the church" and an instructor in "the Lord's school."

These examples show that Luther viewed Christian progress not as something that grows up to heaven but that grows through suffering, ambiguity, trials, and failures; that is, it is growth in the cross. Although such a cruciform view of progress and sanctification might sound morose and unappealing, it has positive effects, especially the affirmation of a theology of experience. As Luther wrote of suffering and trials in 1545, "This is the touchstone which teaches you not only to know and understand, but also to experience how right, how true, how sweet, how lovely, how mighty, how comforting God's Word is, wisdom beyond all wisdom."¹⁴⁾

13) LW 4:58-59, amended for gender inclusive language.

14) LW 34:286-287.

A theology of experience that makes room for hardship gives a beneficial opportunity to be honest about life's pains and sorrows. Such honesty can support rather than suppress courageous discipleship.

4. *Luther's School of the Cross and the "Art of Dying"*

On this point of learning to live with Christ, Luther's school of the cross also intersects with his instructions on how to die. As historian Berndt Hamm has shown, Luther's 1519 *Sermon on Preparing to Die* consciously picked up the themes of late-medieval *ars moriendi* (the art of dying) literature and adapted them to serve his evangelical program. "In a very principled and typical Reformation sense, Luther's teachings about how to die and how to live fall together."¹⁵ In that early work, the reformer contrasted the terrifying images of sin, death, and hell with gospel images of life, grace, and salvation.¹⁶ Rather than suggesting that those who are dying battle the forces of hell and the devil on their deathbeds, Luther recommended that people fight those battles earlier in life, before such intense moments of crisis and death. Answering the question of how one might overcome the evil thoughts that can terrify people who are about to die, he advised, "You must look at death while you are alive and see sin in the light of grace and hell in the light of heaven."¹⁷ Typical for *ars moriendi* literature, the contemplation of death provided a broader foundation for daily lives of truth and strength.

Luther then connected seeing sin in the light of grace and hell in the light of heaven with the cross, as he wrote, "Engrave that picture [of grace] in yourself with all your power and keep it before your eyes. The picture of grace is nothing else but that of Christ on the cross and of all his dear saints."¹⁸ Indeed, Luther went on to identify each of the three gospel images

15) Berndt Hamm, *The Early Luther: Stages in a Reformation Reorientation*, translated by Martin Lohrmann (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2014), 152.

16) LW 42:114. For more on Luther's *Sermon on Preparing to Die*, see Berndt Hamm, *The Early Luther*, 110-153.

17) LW 42:103.

18) LW 42:104.

of life, grace, and salvation with the cross. It is also worth noting that the phrase "all of his dear saints" locates the individual within a supportive community of faith; the dying are not alone.

Should a person wonder when and where Christ defeated all enemies, Luther answered, "On the cross! There he prepared himself as a threefold picture for us, to be held before the eyes of our faith against the three evil pictures [of sin, death, and hell] with which the evil spirit and our nature would assail us to rob us of this faith."¹⁹⁾ Finally, Luther connected the endurance and contemplation of suffering with schooling in the way of Christ: "[God] lets the trials of sin, death, and hell that come to you also assail his Son and teaches you how to preserve yourself in the midst of these and how to make them harmless and bearable."²⁰⁾ In this light, the phrase *scola crucis* provides a helpful lens for understanding Luther's conviction that Christian progress means growth in intimacy with the deadly realities we truly face and with the even more transforming power of Christ's cross.

5. Luther's School of the Cross and Christian Progress

After his condemnation at the imperial diet of Worms in 1521, Luther needed to defend his teaching that baptized, redeemed and sanctified Christians still fight against sin in themselves all their lives. Indeed, ever since the early Reformation, Lutherans have been challenged to say what they mean about sanctification in this life when they insist that sin remains in Christians even after baptism. Luther explained this by turning to the parable of the woman who leavens an entire batch of dough by adding a little bit of yeast (Matthew 13:33).

The new leaven is the faith and grace of the Spirit. It does not leaven the whole lump at once but gently, and gradually, we become like this new leaven and eventually, a bread of God. This life, therefore, is not godliness but the process of becoming godly, not health but

19) LW 42:106.

20) LW 42:114.

getting well, not being but becoming, not rest but exercise. We are not now what we shall be, but we are on the way. The process is not yet finished, but it is actively going on. This is not the goal but it is the right road. At present, everything does not gleam and sparkle, but everything is being cleansed.²¹⁾

For Luther, Christian progress is not being clean but getting cleansed, not avoiding crosses but living with them, not an escape from sin and death but a journey through the valley of the shadow of death into daily life with God.

This counterintuitive idea that life and liberation come to broken people amid their struggles rather than apart from their fallenness informed key works of spiritual devotion and Christian education like Luther's *Small Catechism*. Luther's explanation of "deliver us from evil" in the Lord's Prayer includes an acknowledgment that this life truly is a "vale of tears" [*ein Jammertal*] that inspires empathy for others and sends people to the arms of a loving and compassionate Lord.²²⁾ Similarly, in his explanation of the Sacrament of Baptism, Luther applied his theology of how to die with the daily life of the Christian: "What then is the significance of such a baptism with water? Answer: It signifies that the old creature in us with all sins and evil desires is to be drowned and die through daily contrition and repentance, and on the other hand that daily a new person is to come forth and rise up to live before God in righteousness and purity forever."²³⁾ Luther's *Small Catechism*, therefore, directly uses an *ars moriendi* theology to take people through the dying and rising of baptism where they meet Christ, their neighbor, and themselves in unexpected yet salutary paths of holiness. This is indeed a daily education in the school of the cross.

Conclusion: The Case for a "School of the Cross" in Luther's Thought

Having made a case for identifying a *scola crucis* as a helpful lens

21) LW 32:24.

22) BC 358.20.

23) BC 360.12.

for understanding Luther's view of sanctification, this essay closes by acknowledging that a phrase which appears only once in his works hardly seems to qualify as a serious category for theological reflection. However, the field of Luther studies is built upon many constructs that the reformer himself did not use in his own time or that were reclaimed much later. For instance, Luther did not develop a doctrine of the two kingdoms in ways that later thinkers have frequently assigned to him.²⁴⁾ Indeed, the category of a "two kingdoms doctrine" seems to have been coined by Karl Barth in 1922!²⁵⁾ Additionally, Luther never wrote stand-alone treatises on justification by faith or law and gospel, even though these are essential foundations of his Reformation teaching. The now-common understanding of Luther's "theology of the cross" so fundamental for this study was itself only unearthed and popularized in the twentieth century through the work of Walther von Loewenich, who sought to prove that the emphasis on the cross in early writings like the *Heidelberg Disputation* remained central in Luther's career, despite the fact that Luther almost never used the phrase *theologia crucis* in later works.²⁶⁾ More recently, Berndt Hamm coined the phrase "faith mysticism" (*Glaubensmystik*) as one that accurately describes Luther's positive use and evangelical adaptation of medieval traditions of mysticism.²⁷⁾ Therefore, although *scola crucis* as such appears only once in Luther's works, it similarly might prove useful to those interested in better contemporary understandings of Luther's dynamic theology of living, dying, and rising again in Christ.

24) Robert Kolb, "Two Realms," *Dictionary of Luther and the Lutheran Traditions*, Timothy J. Wengert, general editor (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2017), 756-757.

25) Jarrett A. Carty, *God and Government: Martin Luther's Political Thought* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2017), 45.

26) Walther von Loewenich, *Luther's Theology of the Cross*, translated by Herbert J. A. Bouman (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1976), 48-49.

27) Berndt Hamm, *Der frühe Luther: Etappen reformatorischer Neuorientierung* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2010), 228; see also the English translation cited above: Hamm, *The Early Luther*, 213.

Abstract

This paper makes the case that a concept called “the school of the cross” exists in Martin Luther’s theology and that it is helpful for understanding Luther’s views of sanctification and Christian progress. This “school of the cross” (*scola crucis* in Latin) is both textual and contextual: textual, because it comes directly from Luther’s personal history and writings; contextual, because it brings together many frequently hard-to-connect pieces of Luther’s theology. Additionally, Luther’s school of the cross engages personal, communal, and dynamic aspects of life together. As the paper shows, this *scola crucis* fosters a theology of experience that has room for suffering, wonder, and joy and invites lifelong growth in empathy, hope, and courage.